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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR VISITS KHUJAND: CONFLICTING VIEWS

REF: USHANBE 1434; DUSHANBE 1211

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: During a December 16-18 visit to Khujand, the capital of the Sughd region in northern Tajikistan, Ambassador met with local government officials, OSCE representatives, and several NGOs. Topics covered a range of issues but focused on the economy, energy, upcoming elections, agriculture, and trafficking in persons (TIP). Viewpoints varied between government and non-government organizations and painted an overall picture of some economic improvements and successes in agricultural reform, but doubts about upcoming elections and the viability of the Free Economic Zone. End Summary.

REGIONAL ECONOMY BIG ON FRUIT, SHORT ON JUICE

¶2. (SBU) During a December 16-18 visit to Khujand, the capital city of the Sughd region in northern Tajikistan, Ambassador met the governor of Sughd region and the mayor of Khujand. Despite the global economic crisis, both painted a positive picture of the local economy: a 5.7% growth in local GDP and the achievement of 2008's economic production level in just the first 11 months of 2009. They touted the recently established Free Economic Zone (FEZ) as reason for optimism, but a lengthy list of problems from the zone's administrator and requests for development aid for the FEZ by the governor underscored the large amount of investment the FEZ would require to become successful.

¶3. (SBU) Energy is a nagging problem for the Sughd region as in the rest of Tajikistan. Local officials said there was round-the-clock power in Khujand, but electricity is rationed outside the city. Both the governor and the mayor cited the lack of natural gas supply from neighboring Uzbekistan as another area of concern. OSCE representatives said coal is increasingly used for heat in underpowered areas and even in Khujand city.

¶4. (SBU) The local administration claimed the planned Roghun hydropower plant would solve all of Tajikistan's energy woes and spoke of broad support for the project across the country. A discussion with OSCE representatives painted a different picture. They reported growing skepticism among the population towards the Roghun plan, as well as weariness due to overexposure to propaganda in the media. Even if the Roghun plan met expectations, the benefits would not be seen for some time. Meanwhile, even local authorities expressed concern over energy supply to the agricultural sector, which requires power

for irrigation and represents a huge portion of the local economy (Ref A).

AGRICULTURAL REFORM MAKING SOME PROGRESS

15. (SBU) Over 70% of Tajikistan's population is employed in agricultural industries and the sector makes up 95% of the exports from the Sughd region. Recent reforms gave farmers the right to choose which crops to grow, but implementation has been difficult to measure. Data provided by government officials, if accurate, points to some success. The best indicator is the reduction of area planted in cotton, which has traditionally been the subject of forced cultivation to meet government quotas. The acreage of cotton in Sughd has dropped from 63,000 hectares in 2008 to 54,500 hectares in the most recent government survey. An increase in exports of vegetables and dried fruits is further evidence of increased crop diversification. This year, total exports of dried fruits and vegetables reached a reported 150,000 tons, up from 130,000 tons last year. Most of these exports go to Russia and Kazakhstan. The governor pointed to these figures as proof that farmers are free to choose which crops they grow based on market pressures.

LAND REFORM: ABIDING BY THE LAW OF THE LAND

16. (SBU) The other hot button issue in agriculture is land reform. Progress has been made in the legislative side to give control of land rights to the farmers, but there are still many hurdles in implementing the new laws. Some USG programs have

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had great success in this area. NGO Saodat has been working in partnership with the USAID land reform effort since 2005 to provide legal consultation to new land owners. The organization helps clients defend their rights against unfair application of debt or charges of improper land usage. In the last year, lawyers working for Saodat won 88 cases in Tajik courts, helping over 8,000 farmers protect their rights. Saodat presents judges with solid documentation and references current law, both delivered with a persistence that has overcome judicial reluctance to approve farmers' land use rights. Judges who have too many cases overturned lose their seat on the bench, which serves as an excellent incentive for fair, law-based decisions. Saodat has 37 cases pending and also deals with civil rights and family rights cases.

FORCED LABOR IN COTTON - STEPS FORWARD, STEPS BACK

17. (SBU) Another key issue for the United States in agriculture is the use of forced labor, including students pulled from the classroom, to work the cotton harvest. The governor of Sughd region reported that thanks to reduced cotton planting, no students were needed for this year's cotton harvest; this is in line with the recent presidential order forbidding the practice. However, when pressed about the use of government employees to pick cotton, the governor commented that this practice was "no secret" and passed it off as a patriotic act on the part of the participants. He further said students requested to work on the harvest by picking on Sundays, (the only day that schools are closed), but said that he refused to allow it. The governor predicted that with further reductions in cotton planting next year, civil servants would not be required either-although their patriotism might bring them to the fields anyway.

UPCOMING ELECTIONS BRING ... SHRUGS

18. (SBU) Upcoming parliamentary elections are causing barely a stir in Sughd region, though local officials paint a picture of many active political parties participating in a fair and open election. The governor said Sughd is prepared for free elections and that all political parties have access to free airtime on regional television. The mayor of Khujand echoed these remarks and said that all parties have begun organizing nomination parties.

19. (SBU) Representatives from OSCE had a different take on elections, noting that many political parties complained about poor access to the media and could not afford to purchase airtime. The NGO Fourth Power, affiliated with the BBC and promoting a free press, echoed these concerns. While there are no reports of blatant action against opposition parties, many complained about the prohibitive cost of registering candidates. The OSCE office director cited voter apathy as a concern. Reasons for voter indifference ranged from lack of faith in the political process and the potential for real change to distraction with much more pressing concerns such as the supply of energy. OSCE representatives noted strong contenders among opposition parties and expressed confidence that one of the strongest, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), had enough support to easily win seats in parliament if the results were not falsified.

ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS UP, AS IS EXTREMISM

110. (SBU) Environmental awareness is on the rise in Sughd region, according to OSCE representatives. One group, "Green Patrol", boasted 324 permanent members as well as strong programs in schools. Activities such as beach clean-ups and Earth Day events frequently draw large crowds. OSCE representatives reported that with growing environmental awareness, the issue of radioactive tailings in Sughd region had gained attention. There are an estimated 53 million tons of these tailings in the region, remnants from Soviet era mining and processing. Contaminated sites are not contained or controlled and remain open to human traffic and animal grazing. There is little consensus on how to approach the problem, but the Prime Minister asked the IAEA for assistance at a June conference in Geneva. Since then, two IAEA representatives have

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visited Sughd and there is talk of setting up a joint OSCE/IAEA office to begin dealing with the problem.

111. (SBU) Religious extremism is an issue of concern in the region, but the mayor refused to comment on the activity of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) (Ref B). The mayor would only say that security organizations are on top of the situation and that religious extremism would be quickly suppressed. Discussions with the OSCE provided more insight, as they were preparing to launch a study on religious extremism, led by the group "Youth and Civilization". The project will study the roots of extremism with the goal of finding ways to cut the problem off at the source. The project has the support of the local government.

112. (SBU) Comment: It's no surprise that officials were

tightlipped about internal security and overly optimistic about the economy in Tajikistan's "all is well" political culture. Local officials generally refrain from giving any hint of bad news to a foreign official to avoid the perception of any trouble. Comments from interlocutors elsewhere in Tajikistan have agreed with the OSCE's view that people already are tired of the Roghun project propaganda. We await the results of a British-funded IFES pre-election poll to confirm whether voter apathy is widespread or is more a northern phenomenon. End Comment.
GROSS